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CUA conference focuses on workers' dignity

Jerry Filteau | May. 3, 2011

WASHINGTON ? "Workers in our country haven't had a raise in 30 years," AFL-CIO President Emeritus John Sweeney said in a keynote speech May 2 at a conference on "*Rerum Novarum*" at the Catholic University of America.

The two-day conference, organized by the university's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, marked the 120th anniversary of "*Rerum Novarum*," Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical on the condition of labor, regarded as the starting point of modern Catholic social teaching.

"When it comes to the measuring sticks of a civilized society ? infant mortality and life expectancy, the quality of our schools, poverty and health care ? we fall near or at the bottom of the list among industrialized countries," Sweeney said.

"Yet we're high up the ladder when it comes to compensation for the wealthy," he added.

"Last week AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka launched our 2011 Executive Pay Watch website, which showed that with millions of working Americans still struggling to get back on their feet, chief executives of our biggest companies were paid, on average, $11.4 million dollars, a 23 percent increase over the previous year.

"Rich called it 'stunning,'" Sweeney added. "I call it 'shameful.'"

The longtime labor leader said Pope Leo's encyclical "is explicit not only in insisting on the rights of workers to join and form unions, but in proclaiming the value of unions in guaranteeing a just and equitable society."

Through much of the 20th century, shored up by the social teachings of Pope Leo and his successors, "millions of Catholic workers and their families ? took a mighty hand in building progressive democracies and stronger and more equitable economies throughout the world," he said.

But he said recent decades have seen a return to the Social Darwinism of the late 19th century that prompted "*Rerum Novarum*,"

"We must restore Catholic social teaching to the center of the American church ? a position it still holds in church doctrine ? and renew the partnership between the church and labor," he said.

Below is the text of Sweeney's speech:

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

Remarks by John J. Sweeney
President Emeritus of the AFL-CIO
Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies
Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor

Catholic University America
Washington, DC
May 2, 2011

Renewing the Historic Partnership Between Labor
and the Catholic Church in an Anti-worker Era

Thank you, Stephen (Schneck) for those kind words and for your inspiring work as Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. The presenters and program you've put together for this conference bear witness to your leadership skills; we thank you for bringing them to our faith and to the progressive movement in our country.

We also should thank you for your apparently paranormal gifts. Today's examination of Catholic social teachings as they relate to labor couldn't be more prescient. Never in the 120 years since Pope Leo XIII gave us *Rerum Novarum* have workers and their families been in more desperate need of the spirit and strength of our church.

Steve shared with you a little of my background. I grew up in The Bronx, had the callouses on my knees developed at Cardinal Clemmons High School, the edges on my soul sharpened by the Christian Brothers at Iona College and my brain wired into my heart by Frs. Philip Carey and John M. Corridan at the old Xavier Labor School in Manhattan.

My parents were Irish immigrants who came to this country confident that America was the right place to start a family in the middle of the greatest financial collapse the world had ever known.

My mother was a domestic worker. She took care of wealthy families and their children on the Upper East Side of New York City. She worked at the pleasure of her employers, with no health care or pension, no paid time off, no job security. Her pay was nowhere near enough to support a family.

Fortunately, my father got a job as a New York City bus driver and he had a union, a terrific union, Local 100 of the Transport Workers.

He could have been an isolated immigrant worker, struggling alone against a demanding employer and discrimination. But he wasn't alone; he was part of a community of workers who used the strength of their numbers to fight for their rights and benefits. As a group, they were able to bargain successfully for a livable wage, health insurance and pensions. Working together, my parents were able to help their children go to college and into productive lives.

Sound familiar? The fate of my family was prescribed by *Rerum Novarum*, which was and is explicit not only in insisting on the rights of workers to join and form unions, but in proclaiming the value of unions in guaranteeing a just and equitable society.

No wonder that in my home, we valued three things --- our family, our church and my dad's union. We knew that without our family, there would be no love. Without our faith, there would be no redemption. And without Local 100, there would be no food on the table.

Rerum Novarum built the bridge connecting those values and molding them into what Cardinal Peter Turkson recently called the "brilliant first chapter of the ongoing book called Catholic Social Teaching which all of us are still engaged in writing."

In the twentieth century, the church shored up the bridge through a succession of papal encyclicals and other

church teachings ? including the important writings of our two most recent popes, Benedict and John Paul II, who was beatified yesterday. Millions of Catholic workers and their families crossed that bridge, and in doing so, took a mighty hand in building progressive democracies and stronger and more equitable economies throughout the world.

What pride we can take in our church and our unions.... thank God for Pope Leo XIII .... thank God for *Rerum Novarum*.

So here we are at the dawning of the twenty-first century, and we are reported to have overcome the Social Darwinism that dominated the nineteenth ventury and led Leo XIII to write his revolutionary encyclical.

If it is true that we've succeeded, then Fr. Cletus Kiley, whom we'll hear from on our afternoon panel, must have been mistaken or overly excited when he addressed our Building and Construction Trades Department Legislative Conference last month.

In his invocation, he condemned the "Wall Street gamblers" who crippled our economy, took obscene bonuses, tried to blame unions and the middle class, blamed the immigrants, then demonized our public sector unions. His comments suggest we've failed in our mission of following *Rerum Novarum*, and I quote directly from his prayer to the building trades:

"Today they balance their budgets on the backs of the working class. Tax breaks go to the ultra wealthy. General Electric doesn't even pay a dime. They say our unions have too much voice in political life, but pretend that we don't see the hand of the Koch brothers and other billionaires underwriting their efforts."

Thank God for a church that produces leaders who are unafraid to tell the truth .... Thank God for Fr. Clete Kiley ....

I don't think Fr. Kiley was overly excited when he made those remarks. I think he was understated. The truth is even uglier and more repugnant than he described.

Today, more than a century after *Rerum Novarum* patterned a blueprint for a society in which the few would no longer be masters of the many, workers in our country haven't had a raise in more than 30 years.

These patient men and women have responded by putting in more hours and sending more and more family members into the workforce.

Now their slim savings are being depleted by the uncontrolled greed Fr. Kiley so passionately described.

Jobs are being destroyed, homes auctioned off on the steps of county courthouses from Maine to New Mexico.

When it comes to the measuring sticks of a civilized society ? infant mortality and life expectancy, the quality of our schools, poverty and health care ? we fall near or at the bottom of the list among industrialized countries.

Yet we're high up the ladder when it comes to compensation for the wealthy.

Last week, AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka launched our 2011 Executive PayWatch website, which showed that with millions of working Americans still struggling to get back on their feet, chief executives of our biggest companies were paid, on average, $11.4 million dollars, a 23 percent increase over the previous year.

Rich called it "stunning." I call it "shameful."

What is perhaps even more shameful is that the conditions I have just described are treated by our society and our nation's opinion leaders as "normal."

In fact, working families in our country are in desperate trouble, and labor unions, the "free associations" *Rerum Novarum* said should protect them, are under attack as never before.

The forces of what Pope Leo XIII properly called "unrestricted capitalism" have always opposed the formation of labor unions, but in the first 70 years after he sent his historic letter to the Bishops, we made great strides.

Working with the Catholic Church, many other religions and the progressive political movement in our country, we built a labor movement that pulled millions of working families up into the middle class.

Protected by our government as justified by *Rerum Novarum* and the encyclicals that, to this day, echo and amplify it, millions of workers came together in unions.

With our combined strength and organization, we were able to successfully champion laws that infused Catholic social teaching into the marrow of our entire nation ? among them old age and disability insurance, labor laws, wage and hour regulations, health care, the civil rights acts, federal aid to education.

I suppose it should have been anticipated, but I think both the church and our labor movement were surprised when employers reacted to those laws and declared war on workers and our unions in the early 1980s.

Some say they were emboldened by President Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers; others think we simply dropped our guard ? the church as well as labor ? and became complacent.

What matters is that for the past 30 years, workers' wages have declined in concert with an historic decline in union membership and a decline in the attention of our church to economic justice issues.

And today we live in a nation that looks more and more like a plutocracy and less and less like the democracy that allowed your parents and my parents to work hard, play by the rules and prosper.

As Fr. Kiley said in his building trades invocation, "Today somebody has changed the rules."

For many years, private sector corporate employers changed the rules simply by ignoring them, breaking our weak labor laws governing contract negotiations, and breaking union organizing drives simply by firing union supporters.

Earlier this year, politicians began taking America's anti-union, anti-worker crusade a step even further by trampling the rights of public employees and boldly trying to eliminate their unions altogether.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with what happened in Wisconsin, where a newly elected conservative governor forced state as well as municipal unions to concede health care and pension benefits, and then outlawed collective bargaining.

This wasn't a struggle over health care and pension benefits ? the workers and their unions agreed to those concessions. This was a struggle to preserve their right to come together in unions and collectively bargain for a better life, and they are close to losing that right altogether.

Now the union-crushing movement has marched into two dozen other states ? Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Florida, New Hampshire, Missouri, Pennsylvania, even Massachusetts and more among them.

If unchecked, this assault on the very existence of unions is sure to spread, and the impact on Catholic social teachings and, indeed, the moral and economic fiber of our nation, will be profound.

It is particularly distressing that many of the governors and legislators involved are Catholics who are simply ignoring the encyclical we celebrate today.

And it saddens me to witness the marginalization of our social teachings in the American church.

Let us remind our entire church that *Rerum Novarum* is not a cafeteria of suggestions and ideas from which we are free to pick and choose, but the modern expression of an unbroken line that stretches from the Book of Genesis, throughout the Old Testament, to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Pope Leo XIII left no room for equivocation when he wrote: "The State has for its office to protect natural rights, not to destroy them, and if it forbid its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence ...."

And let us also remind our Catholic elected officials as well as church leaders that an attack on workers' freedom to come together for a better life is an attack on the fundamental teaching of the church about human dignity?not some ancillary doctrine that applied to our grandparents but not to us.

"Economic Justice for All," issued by our U.S. Catholic bishops in 1986, reinforced *Rerum Novarum* as well as the teachings of a succession of popes. It instructed us, and I quote:

"No one can deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. Therefore, we oppose organized efforts such as those regrettably now seen in this country, to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing."

Brothers and sisters, our instructions on these issues are clear and it falls to the church and its leaders to renew them, not tomorrow, but today.

Let me close by observing that it will take more than words and admonitions to rescue working families from a society that insists they should have no say in the decisions affecting them.

It will take a genuine renewal of the social teaching tradition in the church and the willingness of the leadership to challenge the economic and political "powers that be." It is that tradition and that willingness that together brought us so far towards the goal of dignity for all work and dignity for all workers.

We need the help of every Catholic leader as well as every Catholic parishioner, not just in matters of public policy, but in direct action that we from time to time must undertake.

Working people and our unions are awed by the time, money and commitment the church has put into the fight for workers' rights, here in our country and around the world.

I am most appreciative of the work of labor priests like Msgr. George Higgins, Fr. John Ryan, and now Fr. Kiley, who've challenged not only our adversaries, but their own bosses down through the years.

I'm reminded of the time not too many years ago when we scheduled a demonstration here at this university over a dispute between the workers' union and the administration. The then president of CUA called a certain member of the hierarchy, who then called me and asked me to cancel the demonstration in exchange for a promise to deal with our issues.

I cancelled the demonstration. But I never heard back from either of them ?

*[**Editor's note:** The following day university officials issued a statement at the conference saying Sweeney's comments did not accurately reflect the facts in the situation he referred to. It said the university maintained neutrality in a dispute between two unions over which union should represent some of its employees and the matter was eventually settled by a secret-ballot election by the employees. It also said university officials did meet with Sweeney.]*

I share that little story not to disparage our esteemed leaders ? my calls for help from the hierarchy have most often been answered.

Cardinal Roger Mahony, for instance, directly helped tens of thousands of health care workers and Latino janitors in Southern California secure union protections and benefits.

And when Cardinal Peter Turkson spoke to our Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington earlier this year, he spoke for all of us when he said:

"I was very moved and encouraged by what happened on Ash Wednesday of 2006. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles confronted the U.S. government on the hotly debated issue of the need to reform the Immigration Law of the House of Representatives (HR 4437), stating that he would 'provide instructions to the Archdiocese and lay Catholics to ignore the requirements.'"

We also had an especially long and rich relationship with Cardinal Theodore McCarrick when he was here in D.C. and before that, in New Jersey, and with Cardinal John Joseph O'Connor of New York, who supported labor, our unions and our members 100 percent ? and we've had a century of support from parish priests across our country.

But I am concerned that the church's support for workers and unions has become muted and even confusing.

Recently, Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki, president of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference responded to our struggle there by writing to members of the state legislature:

"Hard times do not nullify the moral obligation each of us has to respect the legitimate rights of workers."

In that statement, which was supported by all the Wisconsin bishops, he quoted Pope Benedict in his 2009 encyclical Caritas in Veritate: "The repeated calls issued within the church's social doctrine beginning with *Rerum Novarum* for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past ..."

But as you may have heard, there were other Catholic leaders in Wisconsin who disagreed with the archbishop and declared the church should be "neutral" in the conflict.

We were grateful when Bishop Steven E. Blaire, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, weighed in on behalf of Archbishop Listecki and wrote: "Catholic teaching and your statement remind us these are not just political conflicts or economic choices; they are moral choices with enormous human dimensions."

What I am suggesting is that we must restore Catholic social teaching to the center of the American church ? a position it still holds in church doctrine ? and renew the partnership between the church and labor, if the labor movement is to survive and perpetuate our mission of being what amounts to an action arm of Catholic social teaching.

We need a louder, quicker, more universal Catholic voice, so we can confront the greed of the giant corporations that have become our ruling class.

We need to launch a new program of joint outreach to the Latino and Asian immigrants who are tomorrow's Americans and who need our help just as immigrants like my father and mother needed it.

We should implement a new and thorough education program based on *Rerum Novarum*, one that reaches into every seminary, every diocese and every parish in America.

And we should challenge every priest to be a labor priest, every bishop to be a labor bishop, every cardinal to be a labor cardinal .....

..... just as every pope since Leo XIII has been a labor pope.

Thank you all so much ? God bless all of you and your families.

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